

## Robert Curvin Interview: Joe Thomasberger

JOE: I think it would be important to get him because he was such an integral part of Newark.

CURVIN: Okay, it's running, so I'm going to sit here, make believe I'm not here, you can just start. I'd like to hear you talk about your own background and how you got to this area and to Newark.

JOE: Well my background started when I was about six years old. My father was a district leader of the Democratic Party in our neighborhood and I went out with him delivering materials for the presidential election. And I've been involved in stuff like that ever since.

And in 1937 The Still workers went out on strike and I had a family dispute and one of my uncles that lived right next door went to work and went to work and was a breaker and the other uncle that lived right next door was on strike. And we would go out on what was called the \_\_\_\_\_ line [40:35] an old freeway through the valley across town in Pennsylvania used to be where a street car went from one town to another and we would watch the struggle that would go on at the mill entrance across the valley and saw the horses and the police and would hear the stories go getting cubed and so forth and so on so I was very involved with that as a kid.

And so I had a fight with my mother when I was a teenager because I was befriending an African American guy in our neighborhood, teaching him somethings about football and so forth and she said it was not right for me to do that because it was going to bring the property values of our neighborhood down if these folks got too friendly with us.

So I had this big fight with my mother about things like that. So I have been involved with this civil rights thing from the get go and then I became an American Baptist pastor and served a church in Hamilton Square New Jersey which is right outside of Trenton and was involved in the Council of Churches there and so forth and we formed a clergy and lay group called Cornonea and we worked on the civil rights questions.

This was in the 50s, '55 to '67 and out of that experience, out of that experience the most striking thing, we had little fights in Trenton trying to make sure people were alright the biggest thing that for me was a trip down to Selma, Alabama when Martin called for people to come down and help in that struggle. That was a very deep experience for me and sent me even further into this whole area.

And then there was a guy by the name of Charlie Williams that was a part of that Cornonea group [37:18] who was an entrepreneur and worked around the state and sold cleaning materials and so forth he knew about the work that was being done in Newark. Becky talked about that, that they were going to try to rehab houses rather than tear them down so we started to try to work on that down there in the Trenton area too, didn't get very far but we tried and so we knew about the things that were going on in Newark through Charlie.

Then I came up to the North Orange Baptist Church, which was in Orange, New Jersey, as a pastor and my work there, we had an outpost in our building where the neighborhood kids could come in and play in the gym that had been built there some years before, so we had long night kind of things there and one of the trustees that was on the committee that was instrumental in

calling me to that post wanted me to get to know the leadership of the city of Orange and he arranged for a luncheon meeting with the superintendent of schools and we had a very nice conversation, and I asked the superintendent, 'what should I know about Newark, who should I know'.

He said 'well you'll get to know the leaders but he said there's two people that you need to make sure that you don't have much to do with at all'. One was Bob Slayter, who was a staff person on the YMCA and who was running the YMCA's programming in our building and who I had become very good friends with. He was just a wonderful guy. I often ask why he was taken out of this world so fast because he was marvelous and did so much for the kids. And the other person that I was to avoid at all costs was Ernie Thomson who was just a bad guy. And I had met Ernie just before the luncheon meeting and was very impressed with him though I wondered why he was considered so troublesome because you know he seemed like he had good sense to me.

So I kept following that line, I came to \_\_\_\_ [33:12] in 1967, February of 1967 and I was working on trying to establish some kind of civil rights and educational programs in our congregation and in our building. And when Newark blew, I had worked with another Baptist minister, Russel White, an African American guy, a wonderful fellow. The two of us went down into Newark the day after the big confrontation and I can remember going into the intersection where the policeman was standing all by himself with his revolver raised over his head and Russel and I went over to talk with him and see what could be done to quell this uprising that was taking place.

He was very upset and nervous and of course felt that he had to have his revolver to keep peace in his intersection. So I can remember going out at night during that time with Bill and I can't remember his last name, he had a brother Steve, Bill Thomas. Bill and Russel and I would walk the streets of Orange and would try to make sure that the kids that were out there and very agitated didn't start breaking windows in Orange and so forth. That was really a rough time. So that's how I got up here.

CURVIN: Tell me about your parishioners and how they saw the world at that time. I can imagine what kind of lessons you were trying to teach. What was it like to be a minister at one of the most profoundly changing periods of that century?

JOE: Well the parishioners had made a decision sometime before I came that they were going to stay at the North Orange Baptist Church and that come hell or high water that they were not going to be pushed out.

They were white people; most of them did not live in Orange. Most of them lived in the surrounding neighborhoods, communities. They were aghast at what was going on in the world at that time and they were very tolerant of me though, there were times that they just didn't understand.

The chairwoman of our board of trustees came to me at that time and said to me 'Joe' the mayor has called me and told me that you are a troublemaker in this town and that we should get rid of you and what was the point. And she said I don't know what to tell him. I said just tell him that

you don't understand what this crazy pastor is doing but you trust him and you're going to stay right with him. And she did! That's exactly what she told him.

It was a befuddlement to the congregation, and we didn't grow, and we needed to grow. We had a big building, a lot of things. This was a building that Samuel Colgate attended when he lived in Orange many, many years before. He left the church quite a nice sum of money which was an endowment, which was a great gift to the church, it kept it alive for a few years, even when it couldn't sustain itself on its own membership.

We were never able to break the racial barrier in our own congregation; we were a white congregation when I came, we were a white congregation when we finally merged our congregation with the First Baptist Church in East Orange and eventually we rented the building to another African American congregation and then finally we had to, because we couldn't afford to keep it up, we had to tear that building down. It's now a shopping strip mall on the corner of Hickory and Main street. But we merged with the First Congregation in East Orange and for a while things went very well and we tried to do, tried to be an instrument of peace and justice but I'm not sure what exactly we were able to get accomplished as we went along.

The church at the crossroads, it's still there in East Orange. We called ourselves up on the island because it was right on the intersection of the garden state parkway and 280 and the entry roads around it made the little area we were in a little an island. So we said we were in an island on the crossroads.

CURVIN: What's the message you'd like to leave to young people for the future?

JOE: I think the thing I'd try to say to young people is that **you have to open up your minds and your hearts to see that we are all part of the web of life and that we come from various backgrounds, from various ethnic and racial experiences and that we have to start to appreciate one another and it's important that we learn to work together.**

CURVIN: Is there anything else you want to tell me that I missed? What about Newark?

JOE: Well I was—I met the director of Tri-City and she needed a bookkeeper because she had some bookkeeper that left the organization Tri City Citizens Union for Progress at that time and I had taken a course in high school about bookkeeping and so I said I'll come down and help you out and so I did and eventually I became on the staff of Tri-City as an American Baptist pastor, my church, at the crossroads and Tri City got this thing together and I was there for a good number of years.

CURVIN: Are you suggesting that there was a partnership?

JOE: Yes, well each of those organizations tried to work me to death, that was one of the things [laughs] you can't get involved in Tri-City without being overworked at least at that time and you couldn't be a pastor at the church at the crossroads without being overworked so it was rough and that's why I finally had to choose which way I would go and I chose the community based organization as my way of working.

Tri-City did some good things for me and for the church and the church did a lot of good things for Tri-City and there was a cooperative relationship there. Tri-City Citizens Union for Progress

had five corporations working at the same time. They had a social service element, they had two housing corporations, we had auditors in our buildings on a weekly basis, from all of the various contracts that we had.

It was just amazing to me how this little organization with no real effort on its own could attract so much attention, but we did. Everybody thought we were stealing money and so forth and so on, it was hard to keep it all straight but we did, we kept it all straight. But we did, we kept it all straight.

Just by an illustration, we had a small contract with HUD, well in order to get the contract we had to go down to Washington and talk with the people in HUD. They were so impressed with the way we were able to present our financials that they said oh yea we will bring you on. We got this contract and HUD sent in two auditors before the contract started to make sure we were ready for them, they said that's fine and that one of the things that they had was indirect costs and I explained how we would do the indirect costs. Everything was going to be fine, everything that we had in the contract was going to be alright. So we did the contract, we did the work, it was fine. And after the things is over the auditors came back in and they said oh you can't have an indirect cost.

The same guys that were here a year ago, he said no you can't have that. You have to show us what you did with every penny of that indirect cost and it just so happened that we had a book keeping system that took all of that into consideration so it was just a matter of going back into the records and picking out every penny that went into it. And we got a letter from them and they said that was a marvelous thing you did. Our little organization really came through very well.

CURVIN: How do you account for the extreme scrutiny that community based organizations and particularly the anti-poverty programs have to encounter in that period?

JOE: There was just a lot of organizations that didn't do their books correctly. They were all so poor to start with that they had to juggle monies all over the place and I had to learn how to do that myself and sometimes you would get into difficulties.

I remember when I first came on there was an attempt on the part of one of the state organizations to recover monies that they said were misspent. And I went back up into the attic of this little house which was our attic and dump through records and finally went down to a hearing with what I thought was good evidence and everything was on the up and up and the person who was in charge of the hearing says well how much do you think that you could repay. I said that we are not going to repay anything because we spent it correctly. And they went into executive session and I don't know what they said to each other in that executive session but they came back and said alright, you're not going to have to pay anything. I don't know, it was always something that was coming up like that.

WOMAN IN THE BACKGROUND: One of our other great mentors was Mil Zestman [14:36] who was a CPA ran a large accounting firm and was very active politically.

He adopted us and said that if you are going to be this active politically in terms of fighting for programs and so forth you have to make sure your records are kept straight because they are going to come and audit you all the time, you're going to be a target for auditing. And so his company made sure that we had a good system and when Joe came it was even better because he

was keeping up with it on the inside. But he warned us that this was part of what was going to happen. And I think that a lot of times with the organizations that were trying to speak up but didn't have that infrastructure would get blasted out of the box because they didn't have the records

CURVIN: Do you think there was a double standard?

JOE: I don't know if there was a double standard or not.

WOMAN: Well we were targeted it was clear, sometimes we'd have several auditors from several different sources and we would make room for them and they would sit there.

CURVIN: What happened with Tri-City as of late?

JOE: I don't know.

WOMAN: They're still going. They still have the Newark operation and they have a very large family visitation. It's part of DYFS where they provide transportation and arrange for children that are in foster care to visit their birth parents and so forth. They do a lot of that and then they still have the foster care. And one of the few, Joe started, privately run foster care where Tri City finds the foster parents, supervisors and all that. So they're still doing a lot of important things.

JOE: My experience with Tri-City, I started in the finance department and then I became a part of their executive group and left to operate a business helping other nonprofits do their finances because they were all over the place having troubles. I went to New York with a couple of organizations over there and tried to help them and I'd help them.

It all was interesting. I also worked in other organizations in Newark. I don't know that it is a double standard, except that now you are hearing all of these horror stories of public corporations that are beyond belief in messing up their balance sheets as they talk about it, and putting assets on that aren't there. I don't know, I don't know if it was a double standard or no but we definitely were scrutinized.

CURVIN: I always found it interesting though that when the anti-poverty program was operating and a lot of new people were really experiencing organizational life for the first time, they didn't know anything about the difference between policy makers and the administrators and the governors and the word from above was you can't mix these things up. You really have to be clear. If you were on the board, you're not an administrator, if you're an administrator you're not a governor or a director. Low and behold when I learn more and more about the way businesses worked they mixed it up all the time.

JOE: Just to continue the story with Tri City, after I had gone and I was out for about two or three years, I got a call and they said Joe we are having trouble with our bookkeeping, would you come back and see what could be done, examine these books.

I said it's all messed up, what happened? And they said this is the system that you left us with and I said you messed it all up, you put things in the wrong ways and so forth and so on so we had to get that all straightened out and we did and low and behold I became a part time executive director of Tri City until we could find a director. We found one that I think would have been

wonderful and she decided she would come on and I went off on vacation and when I came back I found a letter that said Joe I have been offered a position that I cannot refuse and I won't come and so I said this is going to take longer than I thought so I became the executive director full time for five years or something like that and we had a good time.

And then when I retired from that I became the first director of a new coalition called the Early Childhood Coalition of Newark and this was when Abbott first came into existence and I was saying to all of our colleagues in Newark that the governor was trying to do this very important work on the cheap and it couldn't be done the way it was being outlined and so we spent about 2-3 years just trying to get the State to understand that they had to put more money into the effort for Abbott state-wide. We started a state-wide organization to help the little community based organizations that were actually the forces of Abbott and we finally won most of those battles but it was a really tough time for us.

WOMAN: Talk about what did you win because that was really significant, certified teachers getting a pay raise..

JOE: The early child hood was a disgrace in the way we treated staff. At Tri City, we had these multiple staff people from housing and education and early childhood, the early childhood people were getting paid minimum wages. You know you wanted to have the best you could get and you would find these wonderful folks but the salaries were just terrible and when the Abbott came along and wanted to have standards that were well above what was there we had to fight to get these wonderful staff people education credits from the colleges and so forth, we had to get time tuition reimbursements, scholarships and so forth. We had to do all kinds of things in order to raise the standards of our teaching and therefore we had to find more money for them and we had to fight about that. This started about, I don't remember when but governor Whitman was in the first and well—

WOMAN: In the late 90s.

JOE: Yea somewhere around there. When did you go into Newark?

WOMAN: '95

JOE: I can remember Becky calling meetings of the early childhood people and telling them what a wonderful thing the State was going to do for us and pay us and I would sit in these meetings and I would say we can't do it for what you're offering. I can't recommend this to anybody. So we fought, we took many a trip down to the department of education and fought with the people down there.

WOMAN: And the upshot was when the community teachers got their certification, the State had to pay the center money to raise the salary up to the first year of a public school teacher's.

CURVIN: The center being?

WOMAN: Like a community center, like Tri-City and the others that were getting the Abbott contracts, so once the community teacher got their certification, it meant that that center then had to pay her, that teacher, at the level of a public school teacher. That was a \$10,000-\$15,000 increase for a lot of those teachers.

JOE: Well they were getting public school rates.

WOMAN: Yes, once they got certified. So that was a big incentive for teachers to go back to school and get those extra credits and work their way up because they knew they would get a decent salary. That was a major, major accomplishment.

CURVIN: And that would not have happened if it weren't for this coalition pressing for it

JOE: Absolutely!

WOMAN: Pressing the issue and also supporting the teachers and the directors to get the resources to do it.

CURVIN: That's why I think the work that Junius is doing is so important because I mean if the state had its way, my guess, it would walk away from Abbott, if it weren't for the courts.

JOE: Oh yeah. Well they are walking away from Abbott but what they're doing is spreading the requirements out to a wider group.

WOMAN: And it's important what Junius does with the parents because that is part of what I was trying to do from the inside but it's pretty limited what you could do from the inside. You really have to have an outside forcer really working.

CURVIN: Well this has been really fabulous and I absolutely thank both of you, I keep learning and Joe has a lot of stuff there that he hasn't unraveled for me yet but I got some of it. That's great.